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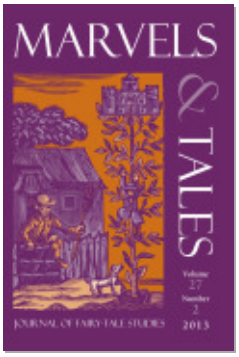
“A Fool Will Never Be Happy”: Kurahashi Yumiko’s Retelling of “Snow White”



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Kurahashi's Approach to Fairy Tales

In *Otona no tame no zankoku dōwa* (Cruel Fairy Tales for Adults) Kurahashi Yumiko (1935–2005) reworks a wide range of Western and Japanese literary sources, creating a fascinating collection of fairy tales.[1] The collection takes inspiration from Greek mythology (Pandora and the Gorgons), Japanese tales ("Urashima Tarō," "The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter," "Kachi-kachi Mountain"), the Grimm brothers ("Snow White," "The Frog Prince," "The Heavenly Marriage," "How Children Played at Butcher Together"), Hans Christian Andersen ("The Little Mermaid"), Charles Perrault ("Bluebeard"), Apuleius ("Eros and Psyche"), Oscar Wilde, Leo Tolstoy, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, Mori Ōgai, and Franz Kafka. Among these tales, Kurahashi's version of "Snow White" ("Shirayuki hime") is particularly compelling in the ways in which it denaturalizes the models of femininity conveyed by the Grimms' tale. As Cristina Bacchilega points out in *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, Snow White "is a particularly fixed and mimetic narrative" (29) that reproduces the passively beautiful female character with limited options.

My analysis of Kurahashi's approach to fairy tales starts with a premise about literary labels. If we try to contextualize Kurahashi within the literary movements that exploit the performative and normative functions of fairy tales, we might be tempted to use labels such as postmodern or feminist. However, this is a controversial issue because, at different stages of her career, Kurahashi has been defined by critics in contrasting ways—a politically committed writer, a misogynist, an avant-garde writer, and so on—and she wrote several essays to clarify her poetics and break away from these labels. For many

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reasons "Shirayuki hime" might be compared to postmodern or feminist rewritings of "Snow White." However, I would argue that Kurahashi does not approach fairy tales out of an interest in movements such as postmodernism or gender studies. Instead, her retelling of fairy tales is a part of her methodological experiment to break away from the conventional narrative form of Japanese fiction.

In her original and multifaceted literary works, Kurahashi tries to enlarge the boundaries of the Japanese novel by contaminating it with different literary genres from both European and Japanese literature. As Faye Yuan Kleeman explains in *The Uses of Myth in Modern Japanese Literature*, Kurahashi "boldly explored new forms and sought to mix Western and Japanese literary tradition in new ways that challenge traditional Japanese conception of fiction" (301). Significantly, Mary Knighton draws an interesting parallel between Kurahashi's narrative space and Metabolism, the Japanese architectural movement inspired by the process of organic growth.[2] Drawing from the connection to Metabolism, it might be said that Kurahashi has taken nourishment from several source texts, digested them, and finally expelled them, producing new types of literary works.

To fully understand Kurahashi's literary experiment, we need to consider that, when she started her literary career, one of the most popular and widely recognized narrative forms in Japan was the realistic and autobiographical novel (*watakushi-shōsetsu*), which conveyed a transparent and unitary representation of reality. Opposing this kind of fiction, Kurahashi tried to create a new genre, the *han-shōsetsu* (antinovel).[3] In other words, as she wrote in "Watashi no bungaku to seiji" (My Literature and Politics), Kurahashi aimed to establish a new kind of antirealistic fiction that would portray the reverse side of reality, like the negative of a picture: "I am eager to keep the negative of the real world, photographed with my lens" (43).[4]

In this antiworld the traditional categories of space and time are undermined, narrative authorship is questioned, and the characters' identities are deconstructed and fragmented. By using imitation and parody, Kurahashi denaturalizes the norms regarding narrative and selfhood, and in this regard her narrative techniques might be compared with those used by postmodern writers. Therefore Sakaki Atsuko aptly defines Kurahashi's position in-between Japanese and postmodern contexts as "a floating bridge between the two performances of Japan and postmodernity" (*Intertextual Novel*, 300).

Given these premises, it is evident that Kurahashi is interested in fairy tales as an element that deforms the representation of reality conveyed by traditional Japanese fiction. In the afterword to *Cruel Fairy Tales for Adults*, she contrasts fairy tales with the realist novel, because the magic of fairy tales

creates a world that transcends reality.[5] In his commentary (*kaisetsu*) in the first paperback edition of *Cruel Fairy Tales for Adults*, Shimada Masahiko highlights the subversive effect of fairy tales on the novel: "The novel is a genre that is at a loss in front of the incoherence, illogicality, and freedom of fairy tales. . . . There is no distinction between dream and reality. Gods, humans, animals, and plants coexist and interact. The boundaries between life and death are ambiguous. Time and space are transcended. The characters are constantly shape-shifting" (238).

Reflecting reality like a magic mirror, fairy tales expose reality's reverse side and give shape to Kurahashi's antiworld. Therefore they have the same function as Kurahashi's antinovel, which in "Shōsetsu no meiro to hiteisei" (The Labyrinth and Negativity of Fiction) she defines as "the magic that gives shape to the antiworld using words" (289).

By mirroring the flip side of reality, Kurahashi's tales expose its paradoxes and play with the models conveyed by traditional fairy tales. For instance, as the second part of my essay will show, "Shirayuki hime" twists the models of womanhood conveyed by Snow White and highlights the contradictions of women's representation. Once again, we might be tempted to label Kurahashi as a Japanese feminist. However, Kurahashi distanced herself from the Japanese feminist movement and had rather conservative views about women. As Furuya Midori and Toyozaki Yumi have documented:

> In a collection of essays written long ago, there is an episode when [Kurahashi] replied to a questionnaire for a magazine survey about sex. She gave an ultra-conservative reply, against sex before marriage, and of course, against free sex. She would accept men's cheating, as long as it did not interfere with family life, but she would not accept women's cheating. . . . Kurahashi herself was born and raised in a very conservative family, and she would not walk or exchange greetings before a man. (150)

As Kleeman points out, although most postwar Japanese women writers describe their experiences as wives and mothers and deal with themes such as marriage and family from a realistic perspective, Kurahashi avoids autobiographical fiction.[6] Instead of producing a first-person narrative about her experience as a woman in Japan, she uses her imagination to create an antiworld apparently unrelated to gender or social issues. Even when her antinovels deal with such themes as marriage and engagement, they take place in a surreal world where the characters are named after the letters of the alphabet. However, by mirroring the reverse side of reality, Kurahashi's narrative denaturalizes the construction of social roles and exposes the paradoxes in the relation between the sexes.

For instance, in the story "Kon'yaku" (Engagement) the protagonist, K, gets engaged to a woman he has never met. He is not driven by love but by the responsibility to complete all the correct proceedings for a proper engagement. The paperwork for the engagement becomes more important than the engagement itself and exposes its absurdity, as in Ionesco's theater or Kafka's novels. Similarly, in "Kekkon" (Marriage), L and S decide to get married on the basis of a give-and-take contract. In this cynical agreement, L, the female counterpart, selects a man with a good income to lead a "respectable life" as a *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother). Even though L has a lover, S does not care, because all that he wants is a wife who can fulfill the roles of both a dutiful housekeeper and a smart nightclub hostess. Finally, L and S formally declare that they do not love each other in front of their relatives, accept their warm congratulations, and celebrate their wedding. The narration takes place in an absurd world, apparently distant from reality, but, unlike other Japanese women writers' autobiographical fiction, it parodies the traditional image of the Japanese woman as a "good wife and a wise mother." Moreover, it exposes the incongruities in the construction of the social roles of "wife" as a housekeeper and a sexual entertainer and of "husband" as the economic supporter and the master of a petlike woman.

Even though Kurahashi did not overtly question women's subordinate role in traditional Japanese society, she was conscious of the subversive potential of women's point of view. In "Watashi no daisan no sei" (My Third Sex) she wrote: "Women are confined to the role of 'the other' . . . but, on the contrary, women who belong to the reverse side of the world provide a strong point of view that objectifies men's world" (31). In other words, women, who belong to the "other side of the world" are able to reveal the reverse side of reality, like the anti-tales included in *Cruel Fairy Tales for Adults*.

Shirayuki Hime: How the "Angel Doll" Is Turned into a Fool

The beginning of "Shirayuki hime" activates the set of readers' expectations about fairy tales because it uses the traditional incipit of Japanese fairy tales—*mukashi* (once upon a time)—and faithfully reproduces the physical features of the Grimms' heroine: "Once upon a time, in a land far away, there was a queen who gave birth to the most extraordinarily beautiful daughter; her skin was as white as snow, her lips as red as blood, and her hair was as black as her jet-black pupils, and so she was called Snow White" (31).

However, along with the narration the patterns of the original story are twisted into a new, disturbing "fairy tale for adults." First of all, Snow White's mother does not die in childbirth, as in the Grimms' tale, but she gets sick and passes away when her daughter is 7 years old. On her deathbed she warns

Snow White about her future stepmother and hands her a bottle containing a special potion, to be used in case of danger. As Snow White grows up, she becomes so pretty that she looks like "a beautiful angel doll" ("Shirayuki hime," 31), but she is not intelligent at all. Therefore she forgets her mother's bottle when the woodsman, following her stepmother's orders, is about to kill her in the forest. Instead, she cries and pleads for her life but, far from eliciting the man's compassion, she arouses his sexual desires and becomes his plaything: "Without hesitation, the woodsman stripped her naked, amused himself with her, and, having satisfied his desires, decided to strangle her" (33). She escapes death because a boar runs out of the undergrowth, so the woodsman changes his mind and kills it in her place.

After wandering in the forest, she meets the dwarfs, who offer her shelter on condition that she keep their house clean. This is a crucial scene in the Grimms' tale; as Jack Zipes explains in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, this scene emphasizes the division of labor and the separation of the sexes in bourgeois society because it reinforces the "growing notion that the woman's role was in the home and that the home was a shelter for innocence" (53). For this reason, compared to the 1810 manuscript, the 1812 edition of the Grimms' *Kinder und Hausmärchen* describes Snow White's duties in more detail: "If you keep our house for us, and cook, sew, make the beds, wash and knit, and keep everything tidy and clean, you may stay with us" (quoted in Zipes 53). This division of labor mirrors nineteenth-century bourgeois values and reinforces specific sexual models;[7] whereas successful male characters are represented as industrious, competitive, and cunning men who accumulate wealth and power, female characters are portrayed as passive, self-sacrificing, obedient women who can improve their social status only by marrying a man. Even in terms of spatial connotation, male characters often leave home and travel, whereas female characters remain confined within the walls of the house. Among the Grimm brothers' fairy tales, "Snow White" emphasizes these differences, because the dwarfs will help the heroine only on the condition that, like a bourgeois woman, she attend to the domestic chores at home while they work outside.

Kurahashi's tale faithfully reproduces the frames that build up women's identity in the Grimms' tale because it portrays Shirayuki hime as a passive woman and keeps the emphasis on the household chores: "They told her that if she could cook, wash, and knit skillfully she could stay" ("Shirayuki hime," 33). However, Kurahashi's Snow White cannot meet the dwarfs' requirements because, ironically, she has been brought up as a princess and knows nothing about household chores. Since she cannot work as the dwarfs' housekeeper, if she wants to stay, she has no choice but to "keep them company at night" (30).

Significantly, the shift from housekeeper to sexual entertainer recalls the double role that L, the female protagonist of "Kekkon," is expected to perform in her marriage, conforming to the mechanisms that frame gender in a fixed, stereotyped image. In keeping with the role of the obedient woman, Shirayuki hime performs her new task dutifully and gets entangled in a sexual liaison with seven men.

This relationship reinforces Shirayuki hime's image as a sexual doll and may remind readers of Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*. Like Kurahashi's anti-tale, Barthelme's novel portrays Snow White as the sexual partner of seven men who dream of her as a piece of roasted meat.[8] However, while Shirayuki hime is nothing but a sexual entertainer, Barthelme's heroine is officially a housekeeper: "She is worried about something called her 'reputation.' . . . We must not be seen in public *en famille*; no one believes that she is simply a housekeeper" (41). In fact, whereas Shirayuki hime lacks the necessary skills to do the household chores, Barthelme's Snow White has been educated and trained to perform her duties: "She studied *Modern Woman, Her Privileges and Responsibilities* . . . including house-holding, upbringing, peacekeeping, healing and devotion" (25), and the description of her housework is so detailed that it becomes parodic.[9] Moreover, these two "Snow Whites" have a different attitude toward their role; unlike Shirayuki hime, Barthelme's Snow White questions her identity, stops cooking, and, instead of cleaning, sits in her room "reading Liberation and admiring her figure in the mirror" (137). She tries to reinvent her story, using her imagination and writing a poem. Conversely, Kurahashi's heroine accepts her role unquestioningly and is perfectly content with it: "After all, she was an extraordinarily beautiful young girl with snow-white skin, and because she was by nature gentle and obedient she quickly learnt, for her age, to be good in bed. The arrangement was much to the dwarfs' liking; and Snow White, for her part, found that she could live a leisurely and carefree life" ("Shirayuki hime," 34).

However, Shirayuki hime's perfect happiness is threatened by her jealous stepmother, who devises a plan to get rid of her. Like in the Grimms' subtext, she fools the heroine three times, approaching her disguised, respectively, as an old peddler selling cosmetics, a young woman peddling lingerie, and a peasant woman carrying a basket full of apples. Whereas in the Grimms' tale the Wicked Queen tries to kill Snow White with a bodice lace, a comb, and an apple, in "Shirayuki hime" she tries to make her stepdaughter look ugly by using a lipstick, some poison-soaked lingerie, and an apple. When Snow White puts the lipstick on, her lips swell like those of an ugly camel; when she wears the lingerie, her body becomes red and swollen; and finally, when she bites into the poisoned apple, her beautiful snow-white skin turns the color of mud.

The first two times the girl is helped by the dwarfs, but the last time, despite all their efforts, her skin does not go back to its white complexion. Reiterating the Grimms' narrative patterns, Kurahashi's tale puts even more emphasis on the ideal of beauty for which Snow White and the Wicked Queen compete. The magic mirror, which is the judge of this aesthetic standard, sets the two women against one another and frames them, respectively, as the beautiful angel-woman and the wicked monster-woman, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out in *The Mad Woman in the Attic*.

The contrasting representations of femininity in "Shirayuki hime" remind Kurahashi's readers of the women described in the essay "Onna" (Woman), in *Atarimae no koto* (An Obvious Matter). Here Kurahashi analyzes the images of womanhood conveyed by postwar Japanese fiction and divides them into several categories, such as the devil (*akuma*) and the goddess of flesh (*niku no megami*): "There is a tendency to investigate to what extent men can become degraded and antisocial, when they worship a woman's body like a female god, become crazy about this goddess of flesh, and are tramped by her. . . . A test for literary apprenticeship is the account of how 'I,' a seeker of literary truth, dares to have a relationship with a woman who is a devil bringing bad luck, and cruelly or, rather, selfishly hurts her" (36).

Kurahashi also notes that in many Japanese autobiographical and realistic novels, women are nothing but the object of men's lust (in "Shirayuki hime" the scene of Snow White and the woodsman is emblematic). Mentioning Kawabata Yasunari's late works, she points out that in postwar Japanese literature, female characters are often portrayed as strange creatures, ghosts, corpses, or mannequinlike dolls void of intelligence—an image that applies perfectly to the "dollified" Shirayuki hime. Significantly, the images of women identified by Kurahashi are similar to those analyzed by Bram Dijkstra in *Idols of Perversity*, which describes the representations of the angel in the house and the devil-woman in fin de siècle culture. The angel is portrayed as a pure and devoted lady who protects her husband's soul from the threats of the material world outside the home. The devil-woman is a fallen woman who does not conform to the middle-class femininity standards and whose beastly sexuality hinders men's spiritual ascent. As Nina Auerbach notes in *Woman and the Demon*, the monster-woman, who is often represented as a mermaid, a snake, or a vampire, is the "other side" of the angel in the house.

Moving from these apparently opposite representations of womanhood, Kurahashi plays with readers' expectations and parodies the model of the virtuous angel in the house. In fact, "Shirayuki hime" exposes the paradoxes in the association between femininity and domestic purity because the heroine's angelic innocence is turned into stupidity. The dwarfs realize it when Snow

White is fooled for the third time by the Queen: "If you were half as clever as you are beautiful, this never would have happened" (36). Also the Wicked Queen's representation is subverted because the monster-woman turns out to be so clever that the prince marries her instead of Snow White. Initially, when the prince makes his entrance in the story, he declares that he will punish Shirayuki hime's evil stepmother, but when he meets her, he is so charmed by her intelligence and her beauty that he reaches the conclusion that the Queen is how Snow White should be, thus effacing the difference between the wicked monster-woman and the innocent angel. The fact that the two women's images are interchangeable in the prince's mind makes readers realize that the Wicked Queen and Snow White are in some sense the same woman, because both of them are framed by the patriarchal gaze of the magic looking glass.[10] The fundamental difference between them, in Kurahashi's tale, lies in their attitude toward the magic mirror; the Queen is intelligent because she is aware of its power, whereas Snow White, who is unaware of it, is stupid.[11]

With an unexpected twist of the original plot, the Queen and the prince fall in love, dispatch the senile old king, and finally get married with a sumptuous wedding banquet. On the wedding night, Snow White's stepmother smashes the magic mirror to pieces and gets rid of the framing gaze that possessed her for many years: "With the job done, the queen and the prince held a sumptuous wedding banquet, and that night, before going to the conjugal bed, the queen took out the mirror and, without saying a word, hurled it against the wall, smashing it to pieces. When the new king asked: 'Whatever is the matter?' the queen smiled radiantly and replied, 'I have cast off an evil spirit that has possessed me for too long'" ("Shirayuki hime," 37).

While the Queen frees herself from the power of the magic mirror, Snow White remembers her mother's bottle and applies the potion to her body. As soon as she has done so, she becomes even uglier than before, because her skin turns a filthy bluish black. The negative consequences of her stupidity are summarized in the moral of the story—"A fool will never be happy"—which mirrors Kurahashi's views about rewarding good and punishing evil in didactic novels. In the essay "Kanzen chōaku" (Rewarding Good and Punishing Evil) she writes, "In the world of adult behavior, we cannot speak of poetic justice. More than the distinction between right or wrong behavior, it is the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate, intelligent or stupid behavior that shapes the adult world" (19). Kurahashi refers to adult behavior because, as she points out in the article "Otona no dōwa" (Fairy Tales for Adults), she is against so-called "children's literature for adults" (221), which portrays children in the way that adults think they should be. Of course, Kurahashi knows that the sensitivity of some "moralistic readers" might be hurt by her cruel

tales, but as she notes ironically, she prefers to show them reality by peeling off its skin and exposing its raw flesh instead of limiting her narration to the superficial scars of the world.

In any case, readers of "Shirayuki hime" are provided with a happy ending of sorts because, even though Snow White is not rewarded by marrying a prince, she lives happily ever after with the dwarfs: "In spite of all her trials and tribulations, you couldn't really say that Snow White's life was unhappy. She continued to work hard in the dwarfs' house in the forest, and they say not only did she produce a large brood of children, but that they all lived happily together" (37).

This conclusion apparently restores the order of the traditional fairy tale, because Shirayuki hime works in the dwarfs' house and raises her children like a perfect "angel in the house." However, by reproducing and then deconstructing the models that frame Snow White's femininity, the narration deprives the happy ending of its positive connotation. Using her wit and sense of humor, Kurahashi twists the original plots and inverts the story patterns, denaturalizing the representations of womanhood conveyed by the traditional story.

Notes

1. Quotations from Kurahashi's "Shirayuki hime" are from a forthcoming English translation by Marc Sebastian-Jones and Tateya Koichi. Page numbers refer to the original Japanese text.
2. See Knighton's "Parutai kara sumiyakisuto Q no bōken e."
3. Kurahashi's antinovel is defined by negation in the essay "Shōsetsu no meiro to hiteisei" (The Labyrinth and Negativity of Fiction): "My novel devours the orthodox, old type of novel like a parasite. It destroys it like a cancer. . . . I will try to list the kinds of fiction that I don't want to write. Firstly, the novels whose theme is an account of 'the truth'" (285).
4. Translations from the Japanese are mine except where indicated.
5. "In the world of fairy tales, there are well-defined laws and there is logic. The system linking together fairy-tale laws and logic is magic, which creates a surreal, logical, and well-ordered world" (*Otona no tame no zankoku dōwa*, 229).
6. In "A Defiant Muse" Kleeman writes, "Before the 1960s, female writers tended to adhere to autobiographical subject matter in their writings, questioning their places within the family and society while problematizing the conflicts arising from the self and the most immediate other(s). The approach and style of these works was largely rooted in the realism of everyday life and they included detailed delineations of personal experiences of love, marriage, and family life" (92).
7. As Zipes writes in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, "Essentially, the Grimm Brothers contributed to the literary 'bourgeoisification' of the oral tales which had belonged to the peasantry and lower class" (47).

8. "We dreamed we burned Snow White. Burned is not the right word, cooked is the right word. We cooked Snow White over the big fire, in the dream. . . . Clem basted the naked girl with sweet-and-sour sauce" (Barthelme 109).
9. "She sprayed the books with a five-percent solution of DDT. Then she dusted them with the dusting brush of the vacuum cleaner. . . . She ironed some rumpled pages with a warm iron. Fresh molds were wiped off the bindings with a clean soft cloth slightly dampened with sherry" (Barthelme 37).
10. "The Queen and Snow White are in some sense one: while the Queen struggles to free herself from the passive Snow White in herself, Snow White must struggle to repress the assertive queen in herself. That both women eat from the same deadly apple in the third temptation episode merely clarifies and dramatizes this point" (Gilbert and Gubar 41).
11. Shirayuki hime's unawareness of the magic mirror recalls the character of Snow White in Robert Coover's "The Dead Queen": "No, I thought, she's suffered no losses, in fact that's just the trouble, that hymen can never be broken, not even by me, not in a thousand nights, this is her gift and essence, and because of it, she can see neither fore not aft, *doesn't even know there is a mirror on the wall*. Perhaps it was this that had made the old Queen hate her so" (53; emphasis added).

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